

PUBLIC HEALTH SPOTLIGHT

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Rumination on a Referendum

Collectively, we are experiencing the novel coronavirus and the multi-faceted toll of infectious diseases when no community immunity or vaccines exists. It is

this scenario, combined with personal and professional experiences with vaccine-preventable diseases (VPDs), which moved so many of us to sound the alarm about waning school community rates in Maine.

When I was in medical school and residency, I had a young physician's hubris that parents who refuse vaccines just needed better communication, information and more dedicated primary care doctors. As I began studying focus groups of vaccine hesitant parents to find the 'right' answer to making parents understand the importance of vaccination, what I found was a room of doors. Some parents didn't need or want more information because they had done all the research. Some parents adhered to ideologies not appropriate for 30-minute well-child check-ups. Many parents had uncertainty seeded in their minds, with roots too deep for me to dig out. Regrettably, we have no time and no reimbursement for these often discouraging conversations.

Neither schools nor physicians can administer vaccines to children against the will of their parents. So, as outbreaks of VPDs became a common headline and my years of unsuccessful vaccine discussions in the exam room humbled me, I became increasingly convinced that legislative public health measures would be the only way to address vaccine refusal.

Others have argued with this view. Coverage of the "No on 1" referendum earlier this year had non-Maine experts promoting less coercive measures. Hypothesizing that legislation like P.L. 2019, Chapter 154, while constitutional and common sense, would cause a backlash from parents, further damaging our vaccine rates. After 15 years of practicing in Maine, I must give testimony to truth that we considered all other options. Yet, Maine's immunity rates continued to drop to unprecedented

levels - leaving schools unsafe and no other more palatable options.

And so, in 2019, with state leadership that understood the urgency, Maine became a guiding star in passing P.L. 2019, Chapter 154. The legislative effort was a heavy lift from so many key stakeholders. I helped co-found Maine Families for Vaccines to amplify the critical pro-science, majority parent and community voices that were drowned out by the vitriolic screams of a relative minority. Maine experienced what is an increasingly common scene for issues of vaccine policy - national and state level anti-vaccine activists mobilized to amplify their minority voices.

The unwavering activism of our opposition to advance a referendum was of no surprise to me. But even today I am in awe of the humbling and resounding support for vaccines in Maine demonstrated in the recent "Peoples Veto" referendum - 73% of Maine voters voted in favor of the law and good vaccine policy. Every county in Maine supported the law. Nearly 100,000 undeclared voters and Republicans turned out to vote "No."

Perhaps most alarming was the *partisanship* of P.L. 2019, Chapter 154, with nearly all Republicans in both legislative chambers voting against a bill widely supported by physicians, hospitals, public health leaders and many others. Our government's essential role is to protect the health and well-being of all Mainers. Facing the future, physicians must continue our advocacy efforts on important public health issues.

Now, as we shelter in place with the world at a standstill - I wonder if our collective experience of 0% community immunity and no vaccine to coronavirus will alter Maine's understanding of what our recent vaccine bill is about. Will we understand that smallpox, measles and polio were the coronavirus of their day? Will we develop non-partisan reverence for and diligence in protecting our community immunity against these maladies with safe vaccines we possess at our fingertips? Will we, as Mainers and Americans, come to once again inherently value collective health that requires us to behave responsibly and vaccinate?

I have more hope now than ever before.